SMILES AND CHALLENGES: MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF THAI POST-GRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE UK

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Abstract

The stereotypic image of smiling, passive Thai students masks the hidden depths of cultural conflict and academic challenges encountered while studying in the West. Researchers in Australia and North America investigated problems experienced by International students at Western universities but there is a sparsity of research into the experiences of Thai students.

Academically gifted Thai students reported various problems while studying in the UK which raised serious concerns and initiated this research project. The research of others, interviews with students and their teachers, questionnaires, classroom observations, reflective journals and group discussions provided a wealth of data which challenged Hofstede's arguably superficial portrayal of Thai nationals. A picture emerged of complex individuals from a diverse nation never colonised by a Western power. Pedagogical and cultural background influenced the academic and social adaptation of the participants to the challenges and pressures of studying for a one year Masters degree at three UK universities.

International students provide a major financial income for UK universities and with this benefit comes responsibility to provide the highest quality education. This study challenges pre-conceptions of stereotypic generalities. It highlights the importance of recognising the individuality of international students and assumptions of national identities. It aims to augment existing research thereby providing a source of valuable pedagogic and cultural information for teachers and their Thai students to their mutual benefit.

Introduction

Each year thousands of Thai students come to the UK to study. The Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] show that in the academic year 2013-2014 6,763 Thai students studied in UK at undergraduate and post-graduate level. Of these, over one thousand were recipients of post-graduate scholarships funded by the Thai Government at a cost of millions of pounds each year.

However, Thai students have reported issues and problems over the years and this anecdotal evidence has caused concern. Some of these academically gifted students were not completing their studies within the allocated time frame and were requesting extensions. Some students were reporting high levels of stress and some were unable to continue their studies and had to return home. Some students were just finding the courses problematic and were unable to complete their studies for a variety of reasons which were difficult to categorise.

This was the trigger for my research study. I felt it was important to investigate these issues and provide a voice for the students. My aim was to shed more light on the key challenges and problems being experienced by Thai students in their studies at

UK universities which would provide insight for both Thai and UK educators and also assist and support Thai students.

Research design

I decided to focus on students studying for Masters degrees because this high level UK university course concentrated the major problems being experienced by the students into a condensed time frame of only one year.   The Pilot Study was an essential stage of the design process. It included face to face interviews with Thai students who were just completing their Masters courses in the UK and also trialling questionnaires.   Key outcomes of the pilot included:

- identifying some key issues and challenges experienced by Thai students in the UK
- defining the focus of the research questions
- fine-tuning the methodology
- refining the design and phraseology of the questionnaire & inclusion of a bilingual version
- modifying interview techniques
- obtaining focused and accurate information which would provide valuable qualitative and quantitative data upon which to base the research study.

The pilot assisted in identifying 3 key areas which were major concerns and challenges for Thai students:

- Proficiency in Academic English
- Differences in Teaching & Learning styles
- Differences in Culture.

The resulting design incorporated a one year ethnographic case study from multiple perspectives focussing on 4 Thai Master's students studying in different faculties at UK universities. The following 3 research questions emerged from the Pilot Study:

- **How do Thai post-graduate students feel about their proficiency in academic English while studying in UK?**
- **How do Thai post-graduate students feel about their pedagogical experiences while studying in UK?**
- **How do Thai post-graduate students experience cultural challenges while studying in UK?**

In order to ensure a robust set of triangulated data I incorporated a combination of qualitative and quantitative data sets which complemented and supported each other. Evidence was gathered from:

- Bilingual questionnaires (n=63)
- Interviews throughout the year with the 4 case study students [*individual interviews and group discussions*]
- Observation of lessons and my own reflections
- Interviews with their teachers immediately after the observed lessons

- Field notes and diagrams of classroom layout including student seating plans
- Student self-reflective personal journals

Several Thai students volunteered as Case Study participants. The final 4 were selected based on their location [convenient to my office] and because they were studying in different academic faculties. They were all in their mid-20s from different regions of Thailand. They had scored highly in their International English Language Test [IELTS] which was a condition of entry to the university course and to obtaining their UK visa. Their English Language skills made it easier for us to share ideas and communicate effectively during the year.

Nickname*	Abe	Plum	Sid	Wendy
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female
Age	Mid-20s			
UK University Faculty	Physics	Law	Finance	History
IELTS Level	Levels between 6.5 - 8.0			

*Not their real names

Figure 1: Thai student case study participants

Of the 9 lecturers who kindly allowed me to observe their lessons and who gave of their time to be interviewed, all but 2 were foreign nationals. It was therefore interesting to hear their views on teaching and learning in the UK and in particular their experiences of teaching Thai students.

As I started analysing the data it was evident that an additional, unexpected theme was emerging. The influence of stereotypic perspectives was prevalent across each of the 3 major research themes of Language, Pedagogy and Culture and it is the focus of this paper. My research revealed a very lively and passionate debate among respected academics who took very different viewpoints.

Challenges to the essentialist viewpoint

The essentialist perspective on national culture was pioneered by Geert Hofstede (a Dutch psychologist) who defined national culture '…as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others' (Hofstede, 2010 p6). In the late 1960s and early 1970s he analysed a large database of IBM employees and formulated a Model of National Culture based on 5

then 6 criteria or dimensions. Each dimension was given a score defining the key traits of that particular nation. Holliday and Piller define the essentialist viewpoint of culture:

'…an essentialist views culture…as a **physical entity**…it is homogenous in that perceived traits are spread evenly giving the sense of a simple society. It is associated with a country and language.' Holliday, Hyde & Kullman (2010, p. 3)

'The *entity* understanding of culture is essentialist: it treats culture as **something people have or to which they belong**. Piller (2011, p. 15)

I was particularly interested to investigate whether the Thai students in my study reflected the essentialist stereotypic imagery of Thai national culture but also how the multinational teachers viewed Thai students in their classes. However, I was very surprised by my findings.

Stereotypic views of accented English

One of the key themes to emerge was a stereotypic view of the English Language and accented English in particular. What was interesting was that lecturers and Thai students mentioned accent as an important factor but from different perspectives.

For example: some lecturers mentioned the difficulty in understanding the accents of some students [especially if they were unaccustomed to the accent]. An Italian lecturer comments on the multi-national composition of his faculty and speaks in a derogatory manner about the mixture of accented English which students experience.

'I'm sure that when you are confronted with a faculty that comes from so many different backgrounds, we have Italians, French we have erm people from really all over, teaching all subjects … So you are combining … **many dirty accents**.' [Interview: Lecturer 5 Italian]

This view is supported by Wendy who comments:

'One of my my my friends say that she does she didn't understand the lecture because she the the her lecturer is **not native speaker**.' [Wendy: Reflections Term 3]

Abe comments on regional British accents and provides an example which he finds amusing:

'…**their** (*UK students*) accent it's something else it's not **your** accent; it's not BBC accent. Some some people are from West London …I been to Manchester and I'm going into to the the department store and and it's not open yet and the security walk walk to me and said "It's **shoot**" "what? Oh ok ok. It's **shut** ok" (laugh). [Abe: Reflections Term 3]

Both students rate a non-regional pronunciation as more acceptable. What is very interesting and unexpected is that at no time did any of the Thai students in this study comment on their own accented English.

Accent has a key influence on the listener and Lippi-Green comments on how people judge or <u>stereotype</u> others because of the way they speak.

'… accent becomes both manner and means for exclusion….when people reject an accent they also reject the identity of the person speaking: his or her race, ethnic heritage, national origin, regional affiliation or economic class   Lippi-Green (1994 p 165)

Accent can marginalise or even exclude. It can act as identifier of social / economic class and cultural heritage. It can also prejudice listeners. Rubin & Smith in their study focussed on how native English speaking undergraduate students at a university in Georgia (USA) responded to being taught by non-native English speaking teaching assistants. They found that some students rated teachers lower [poorer teachers] if they had non-native accents.

'[students]… need to be disabused of the stereotype that teachers who speak with non-native accents are necessarily going to be poor instructors. Rubin and Smith (1990, p. 350)

Nomnian (2008) in his research on Thai students attending a Masters class in a UK university also raised the issue of how Thai students responded negatively to regional and non-native English and favoured the stereotypic portrayal of standard English.

'…it is imperative for Thai students to develop optimistic attitudes towards multilingualism and varieties of spoken English inside and outside the classroom'. Nomnian (2008 p34)

Stereotypic representation of national culture

The representation of National Culture or National Identity as a stereotypic descriptor was very interesting. The Thai students tended to identify the Asian students in their social group by nationality e.g. Malaysian, Hong Kong Chinese and group the others as stereotypic Westerners or Europeans (which included N Americans).

However, when I interviewed Western lecturers, they tended to identify the Western students by nationality e.g. German, Italian, American etc and referred to the Asian students as a stereotypic group.

Plum comments in a humorous manner on the stereotypic phenotype of 'black hair' which she employs to describe fellow-Asians

'At first er oh so many Asians *(laughter),* entire class … oh my god I saw **black hair everywhere** but you know after two weeks it feels like it's only me.' [Plum. Interview. Term 1]

However other examples illustrated how some sensitive issues can cause offence in relation to inter-cultural relationships. In an interview during the first term, Wendy was keen to debate the role of America in SE Asia. She was particularly upset by the perspective taken by the North American teacher in relation to the Vietnam war. She felt passionately about this topic but in the interview she also demonstrated a generalised cultural stereotypic viewpoint when describing the Western philosophy of intervention.

'… because they are Western, they think in a Western way. They never think about another side …' [Wendy Interview Term 1]

Abe was upset by the stereotypic representation of Thai national culture in a Western film about Thai kick-boxing

'You know, when the *[Thai]* culture came to international level it's kind of fake; it's not true and every every people in that country *[Thailand]* will know that that's **not** our culture.' [Abe Reflections Term 3]

Angela Reyes comments that cultural stereotypes can be perpetuated through media.

'…stereotypes can circulate through various popular media, such as film, television…which can perpetuate the distribution of value'   Reyes (2009 p57)

She states that that it is the responsibility of writers and film producers to represent national cultures in an authentic manner.

Another interesting aspect to this focus was how Thai students viewed intercultural relationships and in particular, co-nationals grouping together.   Brown, in her research at a UK university, commented that fellow-international students found that 'Thai students were seen to be the most entrenched and unapproachable' Brown (2009 p187).

Sid however provided an example from his own experience which challenges Brown's findings and opens the area for further research in particular the motivation for co-cultural grouping:

'…this term we had to … select our own *[work]* groups and then somebody …approached me … and ask me if I wanted to join him. So I think erm well it's not that big a deal but then I I still felt erm quite good about it … so I'm not that bad to work with (laugh) after all!' Sid, [Reflections Term 3]

Abe also challenged Brown's findings and shared his observations of co-cultural grouping. He notes a prevalence for Chinese students to group together which he identifies as a 'problem' but interestingly, he also includes Europeans who he observed also naturally gravitate towards their own culture:

'Chinese have this problem as well; they group, they clustering with their own Chinese people nationality and er people er that that usually come together is European because they they have same cultural.' [Abe. Reflections Term 3]

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Reyes comments on how stereotypes can be an advantage to minority groups.

'…positioning the self and other…is part and parcel of how stereotypes are used to resist oppression and celebrate identities …invoking the Asian stereotype foregrounds the potential for inhabiting this stereotype'. Reyes (2009, p.53)
She continues by explaining:

'…using the idea of stereotype as resource' it is interesting '…how people re-appropriate stereotypes of their ethnic grouping as a means through which to position themselves and others in socially meaningful ways'.   Reyes (2009 p 44)

By 'inhabiting the stereotype' individuals from ethnic minority groups can position themselves as members of a larger group which can provide strength and identity. However, Spreckels and Kotthoff provide a timely warning against the dangers of stereotyping:

 "…we must categorize in order to make the world understandable, for categorization means simplification…it is precisely in this simplification that we find a danger of stereotyping and thereby as a consequence the danger of developing prejudices' Spreckels and Kotthoff (2009 p. 422)

It is clear that the issue of stereotype is far more nuanced and subtle than one would initially suspect. Reyes (2009) and Spreckles and Kotthoff (2009) illustrate the diverse and complex nature of this sensitive subject. Whether one embraces the positive stereotype of a similar-minded, larger co-cultural group of individuals who provide support or a sense of belonging to its members or use stereotypic language as a descriptor of a culture or nation with which one is unfamiliar, they underline how distress and misunderstanding can be an unintended outcome.

Stereotypic behaviour in the classroom

The classroom is another location where stereotyping can occur and which was prevalent in the interviews with Thai students and also their teachers.   Examples show how some lecturers generalised classroom behaviour by national identities:

 'Thai students are very quiet and it is difficult to know if they understand anything. Students from the US talk anyway and tend not to be embarrassed speaking in public. Students who respond the best in lectures tend to come from the UK, India and Germany.' [Lecturer 9 Punjabi / Sid]
Interestingly the Thai students in this study also exhibited a similar tendency towards stereotypic national descriptions of their class mates and even their own behaviour as Thai nationals.

'We [*Thai*] we are modest, quite modest compared to European…. American people is very, very show off! They would ask question; a lot. Sometimes it makes sense, sometime it doesn't. … I do ask if I think it's worthwhile'.   [Abe: Reflections Term 3]

The stereotypic view that Thai students are reluctant to participate in class was challenged by comments made by some of the Thai students in this study. Abe

(above) comments that he will not ask a question in class unless he '…thinks it's worthwhile'. Sid as we saw earlier was very pleased to be invited to join a work group of his class peers. Wendy explained that it was not an unwillingness to participate which was the problem:

'Sometime [I] have the answer when he ask but … I need time to think about it but he's already gone (laugh) when I want to say something…. I need time to understand the question and then to think. I cannot answer quickly like other student but some time I can answer.' Wendy [Interview Term 2]

Brown in her research comments that co-national students [at UK universities] are driven by '…shame and the desire to avoid anxiety, retreat from English-speaking scenarios into the comfort of the **mono-ethnic ghetto**'. Brown (2009 p 188).

However, my research did not support this observation. Positive comments were received from Thai students where the teacher took the initiative by mixing the students and rearranging seating plans before embarking on a group discussion.

I also discovered that some of the Thai students modified their behaviour as the year progressed. Sid for example started the year by participating in a multi-national student football team and a rock band. However, as the terminal exams approached he made the pragmatic decision to join a study group of SE Asian students to share the work load and benefit from the diverse academic strengths of the group members.

Chalmers and Volet also note that South-East Asian students in Australia, formed 'informal study groups' which provided opportunities to 'clarify their understanding of tutorials and course work'. The study groups also provided '**social and emotional support**…previously supplied by their communities and families' Chalmers and Volet (1997 p 92)

This is a very different interpretation to the observations made by Brown illustrating that superficial stereotypic behaviour needs to be investigated in order to obtain a true and enlightened understanding of the underlying motivation.

Conclusion

This theme of stereotype emerged unexpectedly from the various data sets and traversed the three major areas of my research: Language, Pedagogy and Culture. I found this unforeseen dimension to the study both interesting and also challenging. This research notes positive and negative aspects to the nature and existence of Stereotype. It has highlighted unanticipated viewpoints both from Western and Thai perspectives.

My research shows that both Thai students and their teachers have stereotypic images of 'others' who are unfamiliar to them. I was not expecting to find such frequent examples of stereotypic imagery or phraseology in multinational UK universities which distanced and negatively depicted the identity of other cultures.

I hope my research illuminates a small corner of this complex and nuanced aspect of human behaviour and makes a constructive and informative contribution to this continuing lively debate.

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Biography

Angela Cleary has been a senior teacher for many years both in the state and independent secondary school sectors. As an assistant Head Teacher she achieved the NPQH qualification with the National College for School Leadership. Working full-time she then completed an MEd in Bilingualism in Education with the University of Birmingham and is currently a PhD student with the School of Education at the University of Birmingham.